

Girl with a Pearl Earring (Peter Webber, 2003)

This film is only partly about colour and light. It's also about textures – the texture of dried sealing wax being split; the texture of vegetables being chopped; of meat being floured; of paints, made of all kinds of weird stuff, being ground and mixed. It's about the texture of bedclothes being messed around with, of plump women's cheeks puckering up; of sleet in people's faces; of being caned across the palms of both hands; of clothes that have been hung out to dry in winter and gone hard.

It's also about claustrophobia, about several people sleeping in one room, and voices raised in argument being heard through thin floorboards. It's about the horror of living on top of your own family when your mind is perpetually elsewhere; it's about hell being other people. It's about the horror of a household, each member of which is obsessing about you in different ways, even though none of them know or care who you are.

When Griet (the Girl with the ... etc.) rushes from the Vermeer household and – whether he loves her or not, whether she thinks they'll be happy together or not – flings herself carnally at her butcher's assistant, it's from a sense of relief that he's someone who knows roughly who she is and sort of cares. It's because her lust has been stirred by the strange monosyllabic Vermeer, who sort of fancies her, but only as an arrangement of light colour and shade – only as a potential artefact. Having your ear pierced by him is incredibly sexy, but you've watched him caressing his wife, and know that there's not future in all this for you. You don't know who you are when you're in his company.



Scarlett Johansson's astonishing performance is the finest example of minimalism. She really is a teenage Gary Cooper in drag – the more others emote and act, the less she emotes and acts, and the more you watch her and the less you watch them. When, nervously, she asks if she has to clean the studio windows, and answers, to her mistress's incomprehension, that if she does the light may change, it's the first revelation in the script that she's highly intelligent; but it still doesn't surprise, because you knew she was all the time. Colin Firth, bright man that he is, can obviously see her skill, and counters it with a corresponding stillness and understatement of his own, so that their scenes together are riveting. I fear Tom Wilkinson looks O.T.T. by contrast.